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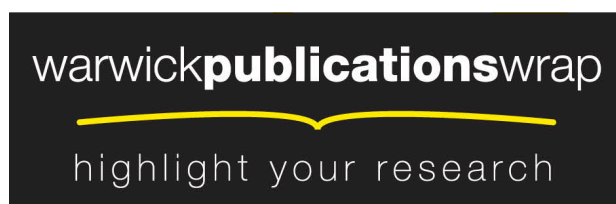
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Democratisation in the Middle East and North Africa: Perspectives from Democracy Support

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ABSTRACT This article offers perspectives on the prospects for democratisation in the Middle East North Africa (MENA) region in the light of political developments since 2010, with particular reference to international democracy support. There are five main sections: first, an introduction shares certain assumptions about democracy support's general record; second, threats and opportunities to democracy support arising from developments in the region; third, democracy support's response to those developments; and fourth, some challenges for democracy support in the region and beyond. Throughout, discussion is contextualised within the larger literature on democratisation. Final remarks lead to the conclusion that developments in the region both present challenges that should be viewed as opportunities, and offer opportunities that will be challenging to address, not just for democracy support in the region and further afield but in terms of the guidance that democratisation studies have to offer.

Introduction

This article offers perspectives on events in the Middle East North Africa (MENA) region since the start of the so-called 'Arab spring' with specific reference to international support for democratic development in the region and beyond. The idea of support includes diplomatic initiatives and technical assistance. Financial transfers to pro-democracy organisations and activities in a country may be a part but not necessarily the greater part. Several assumptions about international democracy support are made at the outset.

First, the evolution of international support for democratisation over the last two decades has tended to be driven more by political change than to function as a determinant of political change. Moreover it has not always been successful either in terms of building better and sustained

democracy or in terms of realising the foreign policy motivations or goals that might be thought to lie behind it. For example, the leaning now shown by Iraq's elected government towards Iran is not what the US intended when overthrowing Saddam's regime. So the record is patchy, at best.

Second, in so far as democracy support should be viewed as having an influence – either pro-democratic or anti-democratic – on a country's political trajectory, the way this works should be understood less as a wholly independent external variable acting upon a wholly dependent domestic variable, and instead more as an interactive process whereby both sides and sets of variables or partners are to some degree mutually constitutive.

Third, international democracy support is a relatively minor or subordinate component of a much more complex international environment, other aspects of which can be - and usually are - far more consequential for the domestic politics. Most notable of these is the pursuit by international actors of (other) foreign policy objectives that may not (always) coincide with the cause of democracy support. This observation applies no less to the MENA region than other regions.

Fourth, for some years international democracy support has been on the defensive due to well-known reasons that include a toxic association with the use of force to bring down governments (i.e. 'regime change') first in Afghanistan (2001) and then in Iraq (2003); more recently the dimming of the superior economic credentials once claimed for democracy, due to the profound financial mismanagement and structural economic problems that several established democracies including the US seem to be grappling with, not very successfully, right now.ⁱ

Threats and Opportunities for Democracy Support

Coming as they did on top of the situation described above, the dramatic events that started unfolding in the MENA region beginning December 2010 in Tunisia could be seen to threaten the global industry of international democracy support for the following reasons.

First, the 'spring/awakening'/revolution' (these words will be used interchangeably) - or more correctly springs/awakenings/revolutions/ (for most commentators see specific origins and subsequent trajectories that are distinctive from one place to another) - are generally understood to have taken place without effective democracy support or in spite of it, and not because of it. Indeed, in respect of what might count as the *international* causes, greater efficacy might be attributed to the

radicalising effect of the damaging consequences that the global economic downturn inflicted on vulnerable groups in society, than to the efforts of democracy support. A further view is that Arab societies took on responsibility for initiating political change precisely because they had lost confidence in outside help, believing that foreign powers were complicit in maintaining the political status quo. These interpretations of what lay behind the revolutions of course must raise uncomfortable questions about whether democracy support is really necessary or worse - detrimental to achieving democratic openings - let alone whether it can now help democratic advance move further forward. The West did not seem to identify or engage with the real agents of change, namely the street, but instead had relationships with Arab governments and elite civil society groups or associations, some of whom were largely co-opted by the regime, which was the easy option.

Second, then, there are now even more awkward questions about whether democracy support should aim to engage much more with the popular level, not just in the MENA countries but elsewhere in the world where authoritarian or semi-authoritarian regimes are still in power, and, if the answer is yes, then how to do it. A practical problem exists where the popular level is fragmented or poorly organised. The regimes can be expected to oppose and obstruct such engagement and may even threaten unwelcome diplomatic consequences. Such problems can be expected almost anywhere and not only in the most oppressive regimes. Even where engagement is feasible, the risk of endangering the domestic authenticity that belongs to local protest emanating from within and below is ever present.

Third, the Arab spring immediately raised a concern – whether warranted or not, but certainly not yet resolved - that very tricky foreign policy challenges for the West could well now arise. Challenges arise not just where very messy processes of political change are accompanied by political instability and great political uncertainty in the short run. They can also exist where a stable new democracy does follow on, and in due course democratically elected governments show themselves to be more responsive to domestic sentiment on matters like external relations compared to their predecessors. Although in the past the political support of the West for the spread of democracy generally has drawn on the well-known democratic peace thesis (democracies do not make war on other democracies), democratisation would at least complicate the West's pursuit of what it judges to be vital interests in the MENA region, not least in the US's case its special

relationship with Israel .These challenges could have a chilling effect on the West's willingness to try to provoke democratic change elsewhere.

However, in contrast to the threats posed by events in region, the Arab awakening could also be interpreted as providing new opportunities for international support to democratisation, both there and elsewhere, for several reasons.

First, the revolutions seriously dented the idea of exceptionalisms – the notion that certain peoples or cultures either do not value human dignity and many of the freedoms that are prized in the West or alternatively are not ready to experience them. They also challenge the notion that intermediate, hybrid, or semi-liberalised regimes that are not democracies can maintain a stable equilibrium almost indefinitely, which is a notion that looked to be gaining traction in some circles precisely as a result of what had seemed like the political stability of MENA countries.

Second, following the Arab awakening there is a chance for democracy support to recoup legitimacy if it can respond appropriately to what are authentically home-grown pro-democratic initiatives that originated from below or from within these societies. This would be a far cry from being seen to parachute in on a country and impose change from outside.

Third, because the genie of political change in the MENA region is now out of the bottle we might be persuaded that the West needs all the help it can get from democracy support as it goes about (re)formulating relations with the region. Foreign policy previously had either ignored democratic goals or trumped them with a higher near-term valuation placed on objectives such as national security, including for example combating international terrorism, restricting labour mobility into Europe and maintaining energy security. Now, however, a foreign policy option of reverting to the political status quo ante in these countries does not look credible,for the status quo ante has proven to be unsustainable.So in theory democracy support should be able to gain an 'in' to the very heart of foreign policy making that previously was out of reach, even if various competing objectives of foreign policy other than democracy will doubtless continue to exist and may still prevail wherea very major contradiction looks inevitable.

Fourth, although in some places like Egypt now the country's interest in being a partner for international democracy support is nowhere near as positive as it was in some other countries in the

past, most notably in transition countries of Central/Eastern Europe in the early 1990s, some new territories previously closed to democracy support are being opened up. Libya in the MENA region and Myanmar outside are examples. Another example eventually could be Syria: if the UN gets involved in peace-building there as seems likely at some point, then the UN will pursue its preferred combination of aiming to build peace and democracy together.

Fifth, after a period when their stock in world affairs seemed to be rising, the world's authoritarian regimes may now feel challenged by the MENA's region's demonstration that freedom and democracy are very widely held aspirations and cannot easily be dismissed as ethnocentric tools of western imperialism. Admittedly the immediate reaction of governments ranging from Iran, China and Russia to Syria and Bahrain has been to increase repression at home. And in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Cooperation Council countries massively increased government spending including salary hikes for public officials has blunted (but not completely eliminated) discontent there. These reactions do not constitute progress for democracy. But they do highlight the fact that notwithstanding the Arab revolution there is still much room in the world for basic democratic gains to be made. And so by implication the scope for international democracy support to try to make a difference sooner or later looks considerable too. In the MENA region in the short term, then, democracy support may see a lifeline where it can aim to show that it has improved its game, while the much bigger picture of millions of people still living under (in some places increasingly) oppressive regimes suggests that the longer-term democracy case for staging effective democracy support is hardly less valid than before.

Sixth, what the incredibly rapid spread of political change across North Africa reminds everyone is that potentially progressive 'winds of change' can disseminate independently of Western involvement. At the same time it helps confirm the appealing idea that the returns to an effective contribution to furthering democracy in one space can be multiplied where there is a regional effect. The democratisation literature already said that living in a good or conversely bad neighbourhood can make a difference to democratisation's prospects in a country. So if the dash for democracy especially in Egypt can be supported and proves successful then there are wider possibilities too, given Egypt's influential place at the heart of the Arab world. Conversely, if the harmful fall-out from the overthrow of Gaddafi in Libya continues to threaten destabilisation in countries such as Mali, with whom Libya does not even share a border and which had been something of a beacon for

democratisation in Africa before the March 2012 military coup, then the case for saying that international democracy support could be useful gains special relevance almost anywhere that democracies look fragile and vulnerable to surrounding instabilities.

Finally, although the purpose of the brave people who went out – and continue to go out – on the streets in Tunis, Cairo and so on of course was not to cause international democracy support(ers) to reflect critically on their own past shortcomings, this is what has happened; it began very quickly and continues to this day.

The Response of Democracy Support So Far

Democracy support's most immediate response to the Arab awakening was to try to decide what to do next by groping around for lessons from its own past, especially instances where it claims to have had some success, such as in Europe's post-communist transitions. But those cases and so many of the circumstances that were present there are so very different from what exists in the MENA region that democracy support soon realised it must veer towards a more ad hoc approach.

On balance the US response to events in North Africa has been ambivalent, for reasons everyone understands. The US response to pro-democratic initiatives has been positive where it has judged the situation to be changing inexorably anyway. But in general terms it continues to be restrained by a web of enduring security and other interests revolving around oil supplies and access to military bases, shared concerns with some Arab states like Saudi about Iran's regional intentions, as well as the US commitment to Israel. The low key US response to the harsh crack-down by the authorities in Bahrain together with their Saudi allies to domestic protest is illustrative. At the same time the Obama administration has sought to put distance from its predecessor's approach to promoting freedom in the region. It knows that a more assertive US leadership could actually prove counterproductive to the cause of advancing democracy in a country like Egypt, where in 2012 for instance the US funding of local non-governmental actors provoked a backlash from the government. The received wisdom for some years then is that although the US remains a key foreign player in the region its desire to see democratic change and its ability to advance that change both lack strong credibility.

The EU in contrast is presented with an opportunity to show that it can exercise political leadership in regard to its own backyard. It moved quite quickly to reinvent some old measures, the most high profile being positive conditionality – new promises of ‘more’ (help of various kinds but importantly not offers of EU membership, which MENA countries do not currently seek anyway) in return for ‘more’ (democratic progress). But for the new conditionality to work there needs to be coherent benchmarking of the political terms, and Europe would have to depart from previous tendencies to ignore slippage in respect of compliance with its demands. The EU is also showing greater awareness of the need to broaden and deepen engagement with civil society. But in this area the EU is notoriously bureaucratic. The establishment of a new European Endowment for Democracy in October 2012 as a joint political project of the EU and its member states is intended to introduce greater flexibility in this outreach, but the autonomy it will enjoy in practice and the (probably very modest) volume of funds placed at its disposal remain to be seen. In any case Europeans are constrained in what they can deliver by overriding political priorities at home, stemming from serious financial, economic and social problems. Disagreements within Europe over how to resolve these difficulties could spill over into the foreign policy arena. Conversely, preoccupation with reforming the EU's internal political structure - an imperative that has emerged in the wake of the Eurozone crisis - might grant the EU's external relations actors more freedom to develop new initiatives towards near neighbours, in the hope that despite internal difficulties the EU can show it is still a force to be reckoned with in the world. The US administration seems to expect nothing less.

Of course the US and EU are not the only international actors in democracy support. Arguably United Nations bodies such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) could be taking a leading role in the MENA region now. But the region has no guarantee of priority status: only 11 per cent of the total of 3014 new funding proposals for the seventh round of the United Nations Democracy Fund currently under consideration came from the Arab region, in contrast to almost a third from the rest of Africa.

Some Challenges for Democracy Support in the Region and Beyond

A challenge can give rise to opportunities, and opportunities themselves can present daunting challenges. It is probably much too early to say whether the response that has been made by democracy support so far tells us it can rise to the challenges or the opportunities that are presented

by events in the MENA region. Similarly it is probably too soon to predict whether it will contribute a worthwhile difference there. But that need not prevent us considering why and how events in the region speak to both democratisation and democracy support and to relationships between the two. Several themes are introduced here, all of them anchored in the belief that democracy support should be grounded in a sound understanding of democratisation – of what makes it happen or not happen, why it sometimes succeeds and at other times fails or alternatively proceeds very slowly and in a nonlinear way.

Intervene early or later?

Events so far in the region in part do seem to tell us much that the democratisation literature thought it already knew, and what international support should be very aware of, even if the policy implications are hard to accept. The banal observation that democratic progress after initial breakthrough is once again confirmed to be something that can be both uneven and uncertain, characterised by steps both forwards and backwards even within a very short space of time, places democracy support strategy on the horns of a dilemma.

One imperative is to stand back and try to comprehend what is going on before intervening prematurely or in ways that would risk harming what should be – and if it is to succeed eventually, must be – a largely domestically determined process of change. Being cautious and taking time to weigh up what is going on looks especially prudent in this region. As political commentators continue to ponder developments there and try to make sense of it all – which means teasing out underlying trends from fast changing and often bewildering events on the surface – so democracy support is left searching both for good intelligence and clear guidance. The fact that the West's foreign policy towards MENA countries so very recently had misread so badly the political scene, and not foreseen where the impetus for change would come from, should be a brake on hubris now. Moreover the region's lack of previous experience in attempting to build democracy, unlike the lessons some 'third wave' countries in southern Europe, Latin America and Africa who redemocratised in the late twentieth century could try to apply from their own previous efforts, urges caution all round too.

However a very different imperative is to seize the moment and what might turn out to be a brief window of opportunity to make a difference, while there is still fluidity and before a measure of local path dependence sets in. Forever playing catch up and being seen to be purely reactive have

little appeal: if nothing else these render democracy support more vulnerable to critics and their budget-cutting propensities at home. The point seems especially true when, as events so far in this region and Egypt in particular confirm what the larger literature on democratic transitions already says, struggle over process can be crucial. This struggle may be just as contentious or divisive as are the more substantive outcomes that the processes themselves help to determine, precisely because of the knowledge that process affects outcome. Matters such as power over devising the electoral arrangements and the steps by which new constitutional bargains are reached, together with the sequencing of these steps with the actual staging of elections, are salient examples here.

Countering anti-democratic forces without undermining pro-democratic actors

Events so far have also done little to dispel another expectation borne of standard comparative and historical analysis that says popular revolutions – especially those where the driving forces were characterised by only loose and informal or ephemeral organisation – can fail to achieve their goals where they face threats from either one of two main sources. One of these is the possibility that the revolution will be undermined by institutions (like in Egypt's case the military) or interests (such as business interests) associated with the old regime, who may at least try to blunt the changes or their impact on where political power lies in the future. The other is the possibility that political change will be hijacked by newly liberated forces who use the opportunity to turn the emerging order in a direction that may be no more free – or is even less free - than before (political developments in Iran after the Shah, for example, although a truly democratic revolution never seemed in prospect there anyway). Of course democracy support is already alert to these possibilities not least from its own experience in other regions. But it has yet to find surefooted ways of navigating expertly between two main impulses that arise in these situations.

One impulse is an understandable desire to weigh in on the side of domestic actors who genuinely want to push democratic reform further forward and might have the potential to do so especially if granted greater strength. This would help maintain progress in the face of other actors – including doubtful democrats - who would be suspected of wanting to arrest, subvert or turn back change. A different impulse heeds the warnings that are often made against taking sides in an emerging political market, where contending forces compete over the pace and shape of change. The warnings may point out correctly that too little is known about the actors and their (only limited) ability

to put support to good use. And/or there is a real risk that the chosen partners and perhaps even the legitimacy of an entire electoral contest will be heavily compromised as a result. After all, democracy support has not been well served in the past where the West has been perceived to show less commitment to free and fair elections in emerging democracies than to ensuring that its own favoured candidates win (the Palestinian legislative election in 2006 is a pertinent example). An extrapolation from this would say that democratisation is not well served either. Hardly less perilous in MENA countries now would be a scenario where democracy support becomes drawn into inter-party competition with the aim of helping 'moderate' Islamist parties navigate between the demands of so called liberal and secularist opponents on the one side and more radical Islamists such as Salafists on the other – a party challenge that is already under way in countries such as Egypt and Tunisia. But only the citizens and voters of those countries can address this challenge, and they must work it through for themselves. There are enough examples of external aid to parties in other regions to suggest that if international actors do want to exert an influence then they should adopt more indirect routes than partisan involvement,ⁱⁱ for example helping to strengthening election management bodies and other ways of supporting the development of a 'level playing field'.

Challenges of development...and party politics

A further major lesson already apparent from the literature about democratisation in developing countries, which seems to be confirmed once again by recent events in the MENA region, is that sooner or later most people will expect political breakthrough to bring tangible improvement in their material lives. That means things like remunerative employment, personal security and the satisfaction of other basic needs. After all, the popular protests in Tunisia, Egypt, Jordan and elsewhere have developed against a background of economic discontents combined with widely-held grievances over social injustice. The governing elites were seen to be using power to advance their own material interests, including by corrupt means. So in terms of modernisation theory, the stimulus to democratic change could only be said to have come from modernisation and development if we underplay the claim that such processes create a broad middle class eager to progress from economic goods to political goods, and highlight instead how a very uneven distribution of the material gains that can accrue from economic liberalisation will provoke strong resentment among groups who lose out absolutely or even in relative terms.

Events in the MENA region show that economic woes and crises can be more likely than prosperity to fuel authoritarian break-down and provide openings to democracy. The fact that Gulf states resorted to increase in public spending that included generous benefits for already bloated public sector bureaucracies and the fact that they have largely escaped major political upheavals may well be connected, although how sustainable in financial terms the response will prove to be remains an open question. Once again, however, the point that economic malaise threatens political stability of authoritarian regimes is not a social scientific break-through, for this is well established in the broader literatureⁱⁱⁱ even if it applies less well to the most severely authoritarian cases, North Korea for example. It does help explain for example the paranoia that the Communist Party leaders in China appear to show towards slips in that country's impressive rates of economic growth. And providing that China successfully turns to domestic engines of growth in the form of Chinese consumer demand, as a counter to failing external markets, it should be able to maintain growth to the point where few if any commentators would predict democratic transformation there any time soon.

But for MENA countries now, there is a separate but no less pessimistic proposition that failure to address citizen demands for material improvement and social justice will easily blight the prospects for maintaining democratic breakthrough let alone the chances of further progress. This is especially so if society holds bad governance responsible for the failings, which is what Diamond previously identified as one of the most potent obstacles to democratic advance in newer democracies.^{iv} These propositions do not enjoy quite the same status as the venerable finding, first popularised by Lipset in 1959^v that says where the benefits of economic development are reasonably widely distributed, a democracy is more likely to be stable than in the absence of such conditions (this does not mean development is a necessary condition for democratic transition, or a sufficient condition to make democratisation irreversible). Nevertheless, failure to develop will be hugely problematic for politics in the region. Even resource rich Libya may not be exempt from concern, for the record of oil and gas rentier states apart from well-established democracies like Norway has been consistently unfavourable to democratisation (by comparison Indonesia's democratic progress since the 1990s could be benefitting from that country's decreasing dependence on oil and gas revenues). For some countries, then, increase in international development support may be necessary but is far from being a sufficient condition. Indeed, if political instability or worse - violent civil conflict - persist in MENA countries then the chances of making sound economic progress there must be poor. This would seem

to make democracy support look that much more essential even if incapable of achieving a great deal on its own, regardless of whether plural party politics takes root and becomes institutionalised soon.

Party politics is revisited here because a less jaundiced perspective on economic disappointment in the coming years is that the trend could provide a useful segue to the kind of competitive party system that ultimately will be good for democracy, in particular for making governments democratically accountable. The argument is that the Islamist parties who currently enjoy more electoral support than secular parties will lose popularity if they prove incapable of delivering on promises to improve the lives of ordinary people. However, different outcomes to this look possible too. One alternative that commentators are increasingly predicting could happen in South Africa is that once the African National Congress faces a strong chance of losing power at the ballot box it will prevent that happening by progressively dismantling freedoms and democracy. What Huntington called the double turnover test for democratic consolidation is never reached if the rule of law is dismantled in this way.^{vi}

The South African example however is not strictly comparable. For in South Africa and elsewhere in the southern African region the potential threat to democracy that today's one-party dominance is believed to pose owes in part to the dominant party's unique claim to political legitimacy. This comes from its connection with the forces that brought national liberation from colonial or white rule. This claim is not available to the Islamist parties that seem most popular in North Africa right now, for it was other social groups who were in the front line at the outset of the recent revolutions. Of course these parties may still choose to try to hold on to power at almost any cost. No less worrying, however, would be a situation where more 'extreme' (more anti-democratic) political parties are able to capitalise on the situation, or if the armed forces see a justification for staging a military coup. Situations like these are easy to speculate because examples can be found from other regions, including where populist politicians are the ones to gain in the short term and then develop autocratic or even demagogic tendencies, with negative consequences for liberal democracy later (arguably Venezuela under President Chávez was an example). If it is to be ready to offer a relevant response then international democracy support must first determine where it stands on whether, how and to what extent its own idea(s) of democracy can incorporate or be accommodated

to local variants of democracy, including especially various shades of Islam and associated political beliefs.

Contested ideas of democracy

Recent scholarly interest in democracy support has supplied a distinctive critical theory approach to the idea(s) of democracy that support should concern itself with. Kurki and others argue that non-liberal theories of democracy – which above all means theories that are not wedded to neo—liberal economics – should be given a fair hearing by democracy support actors as well as in literature about their activity.^{vii} As to what these theories are, their compatibility with liberal democracy and the extent to which they are truly democratic are all questions that merit more extended discussion. The substantive policy implications that would follow for democracy support are at an even more exploratory stage, with the exception of some obvious conclusions about what democracy support should not do or should cease doing, such as impose neo-liberal economic solutions.

The democracy support industry's willingness to offer support to the establishment of alternatives to familiar western style democracy especially any that reject the market economy even when rigorously regulated is debateable. Its preparedness to proactively encourage real alternatives is even more doubtful. Furthermore, there is far from compelling evidence that radically different and coherent ideas of political economy and a credible strategy for executing them are high on the agenda of the ruling elites in MENA countries today, even if some commentators in the West wish the situation was different. And while on the one hand there are claims that at least some European democracy support is very comfortable with social democratic ideas and measures, on the other hand the freedom to make policy enjoyed by many MENA region governments is heavily constrained by their own financial weakness and structural forces in the global financial and economic system. These forces are vastly more powerful than any influence that the democracy support industry might exert independently by seeming to acquiesce in dominant liberal economic ideas. Of course this state of affairs may well prove to be hugely problematic for the countries' rulers going forward. This is especially so if it is neo-liberal economic policies themselves, rather than the way the governments have applied and implemented them in the past that contributed so greatly to the bad social consequences and the ensuing popular protest that unseated the old regimes.

Be that as it may, there are other areas of ideological contestation that look no less – and possibly even more - pertinent, the most notable being in regard to political Islam. The issue here is very much about ideas of democracy, not about whether democracy can thrive in a market economy, and not the now outmoded belief associated with some of Huntington's writings that certain cultures including those permeated by Islamic, Confucian and even Catholic religious beliefs are inhospitable conditions for sustained democratisation.^{viii} Nevertheless international democracy support does now have to ask itself whether the idea of democracy with Islamist characteristics is coherent and meaningful, and, if the answer is yes, where the conceptual boundaries lie. Of course it is not only democracy support that must think this through. Philosophers and religious scholars have ruminated on this for many years. But the fact that Islam can be seen as a broad church makes it both easier to contemplate the possibility of combining aspects of political Islam with democracy, and also more difficult to establish exactly where to draw the line. The guidance that democracy support might hope to find from the more theoretical discourse is not entirely clear cut, even as democracy support itself must now confront these issues full on probably for the very first time.

The democratising experience of Turkey, which in recent years has benefitted from strong economic performance and external prodding by the EU on human rights, and Indonesia's democratic progress, are two important cases that may be read as showing the compatibility of Islamism and democracy. But to all intents and purposes they resemble secular states (although Indonesia's constitution differs from Turkey in requiring faith in one of several religions). This presents a contrast with what seems likely to emerge in the Arab countries. Furthermore international democracy assistance has not had a substantial on-the-ground presence in either Turkey or Indonesia. Turkey is indeed now talked about in some quarters as a democratic role model for majority Islamic societies. But there are crucial differences between Turkey's political evolution to date and that of Arab countries. Furthermore, and perhaps because Turkey is being talked about as a model, Turkey's own liberal democratic shortcomings at the present time including major infringements of press freedom attract growing criticism in the West. So, taking a position on whether and how to reconcile notions that the people are sovereign and all citizens are formally equal (which lie at the heart of democracy as it has been understood in the West) on the one hand, with approaches to institutionalising Sharia law in some way and recognising differential rights for groups according to sex, religion, sect or ethnicity, on the other hand, will be a severe test for the democracy support industry. The familiar

mantra heard from democracy's international supporters that says societies must make their own democratic choices about the shape of democracy, because no one size or single model of democracy can fit all, sharpens the dilemma. Neither democracy promotion's clearest successes so far – which arguably lie among European countries that transited from Communist Party rule - nor the failures (in Europe and elsewhere) have helped prepare it to address this conundrum. Of course if the MENA countries now move back towards irrefutably authoritarian and illiberal or undemocratic rule then the imperative to address questions about how and how far political Islam and democracy are compatible, and what support should be given for building democracy, will seem less urgent. But from a democratisation perspective this would not be a prospect to be welcomed.

Institutional matters

Struggles over democracy's future in the MENA region will make it more difficult to hide from the under-representation of gender issues relative to other issues in democracy support, in democratisation and in the relevant literatures. For signs are already present that women face discrimination in the shaping and the substance of the new political order notwithstanding their significant role as activists during the Arab spring. Late changes to the wording of Egypt's December 2012 constitution and protests by women in Tunisia, who compared to other Arab countries have more to lose than men from the transformation of the previous regime, are some of the evidence. But if getting the institutional architecture right is one - albeit not sufficient - approach to securing greater female emancipation and empowerment then making the executive more accountable, in a part of the world where historically the legislature, judiciary and (opposition) parties have all been extremely weak, must also be high on every democrat's agenda. Here the democracy support actors can at least aim to provide opportunities for comparative politics specialists in institutional design to engage both with themselves and of course political actors in the region.

Of course governments must have some ability to deliver on what society wants from government - and on the promises that politicians make when they seek public office - if accountability is to have meaning and the electorate's opportunity to make choices at the ballot box are to have value. But experience from many places shows that strengthening the ability of governments to do precisely that often have to be accompanied by efforts to ensure they *will* do that. Recent research on black Africa claims that democracy aid has indeed supported democratic transitions there.^{ix} But the

long record of international development aid including some of its more recent interest in reforming governance also indicates that by enhancing the government's executive capabilities such aid can work against making government more democratically accountable.^xTo exert a countervailing force, by keeping democratic objectives as well as the more development-oriented improvements in governance firmly in view, should fall foursquare within democracy support's own terms of reference.

In regard to legislative strengthening, some agencies of international development cooperation have recently shown increased interest in providing support for this aim, especially in sub-Saharan Africa. And in respect to the development of competitive political party systems, this means supporting the efforts of local actors to reach consensus on how the electoral game should be played, and devising or constructing institutions that will ensure the playing field stays reasonably even. This is essential if the emergence of what Levitsky and Way call competitive authoritarianism is to be avoided.^{xi} The importance of support for the institutionalisation of an enabling environment for competitive politics between elections, rather than simply at the time when elections are held, is an important finding of much of the work that has been done on international election observation and monitoring.^{xii} This resonates with for example Egypt's experience of elections in years ahead of the Arab spring. Similar findings apply to party support too, where a long-term approach to building a competitive party system requires much more than offering direct support to parties individually, where financial support specifically can arouse suspicions of improper foreign interference even when not banned outright by law. Beyond political parties and legislatures, yet another sector where broadly based research suggests strong performance can play a crucial role in preventing democratic backsliding is a flourishing press and other independent media.^{xiii} This means that international support ranging from technical assistance to diplomatic interventions on behalf of journalists who would otherwise face harassment or persecution may be appropriate. At the same time it must now take account of the dramatically increased potential of social media to assist social mobilisation for democratic causes, and the techniques governments use to control electronic communication for anti-democratic purposes, if it wants to make an impact in the future.

Finally, getting civil-military relations right is one more component of the architecture of democracy that needs to be addressed, and is more pressing in the MENA region than has been true of some other countries that entered transition to democracy in the last twenty years or so. After all,

the position the armed forces took proved crucial to the way events played out in the region once popular protests started to gain momentum, as a comparison of Tunisia and Egypt, where the military declined to prop up the old rulers at any cost, with Libya and Syria illustrates well. In future a staggered draw-down of military privileges, as in Chile in the years following the Pinochet dictatorship, might be one option. Another option is allowing the armed forces to keep financial assets and business interests they accumulated in the past and even to continue to profit from government arms purchases, in return for bowing out of politics. This appears to have served the stability of Indonesia's new democracy.

Introducing democracy amid violence

The persistence of politically motivated violence in countries including Iraq, Libya, Yemen, and Syria reminds us that in contrast to the West's past encouragement to democratise and support for security sector reform in this region (and elsewhere), which proceeded along two separate tracks, now more holistic thinking and joined-up practice are needed more than ever. Formerly, security sector initiatives that reflected the West's interest in maintaining political stability for the purpose of combatting international terrorism, controlling migrant labour flows and so on could be accused of undermining the prospects for transition to democracy there. The contradictions seemed to be ignored at the time. Analysts studying international security and political scientists studying either democratisation or democracy support did not engage in a seamless discourse. Practical collaboration among practitioners on the ground was not much in evidence either.

However, given that political change has begun in the MENA region, and the West's worst nightmares about turmoil and even the possibility that one or more states might start to fail begin to look less incredible, the goal of making security sector reform work for the benefit of building democracy (and vice versa) looks both sensible and essential. The rationale for doing so applies at least up to the point where new democracies start to deliver real benefits to society – creating multiple stakeholders in both peace and democracy at the same time. Once again there is an assumption being made here that reversion to something like the political status quo ante would not be an attractive alternative, if only because it could promise no guarantees of political stability let alone freedom or democracy. But as stability remains a prime concern still, so making a success of democracy-building now becomes a security priority for the West. Some of the more practical political

challenges are already flagged up in the literature. For example Gillies presents arguments supported by strong evidence from several cases urge against staging elections in so-called post-conflict situations prematurely.^{xiv} The chances of provoking yet more or renewed violence, diminishing political legitimacy and preventing stable governance will be worth considering in the context of Syria at some point in the future, even if the lessons come too late for some other countries such as Iraq. But social science too faces challenges in coming to terms with the necessary degree of inter(not multi)-disciplinarity if the lacunae between security and foreign policy studies on one side and democratisation and democracy support studies on the other are to be bridged.

Aside from elections, developing institutions for exacting proper legal accountability and effective civilian oversight of the military, para-military, police and other security services is no less important than helping weak or fractured states (re)gain something close to a monopoly of the means of physical violence across the full length and breadth of their country. Indeed, the environment presented by such states is precisely one where international help with developing these institutions could both be essential and feasible too. This may well be true even at times when no one can be sure what the political complexion of the emerging civil power will look like or how far it is truly committed to all the freedoms normally associated with core democratic values. Everywhere, the larger point stands: the presence of viable state institutions is generally regarded as a *sine qua non* for democracy-building and so for any democracy-supporting agenda. Experience in the MENA region turns the analysis then in the direction of what the democratisation literature calls the sequencing debate. Efforts to establish the rule of law and construct regularising grounded institutions for the societal expression of interests and demands must accompany such democratic advances as those which invite contestation and promote popular participation.

Final remarks

Three sets of overarching conclusions are offered here: first, about the region; second, about democratisation studies; and third about the guidance these can offer to democracy support in the region and beyond.

First, while recent developments in the MENA region have served to underscore some things about democratisation that analysts thought they already knew, it is not obvious that we understand enough to foresee with confidence the way things will turn out. The exceptions are rather sweeping

judgments, like the future for the most part remains uncertain; and the paths or pace of political change will probably vary from one country to another because of differences in their political history and other conditions. So, no singular model of Arab democracy and no one pattern of Arab democratisation, even though distinctively Islamic versions look more of a possibility.

Furthermore there is little new to be gained by arguing that recent events in the region have shattered the belief that autocratic downfalls are impossible, or the belief that when they do occur, progression to democracy is inevitable or linear and smooth. The many political twists and turns that have been witnessed around the world during the last two decades, and the large democratisation literature that has been spawned, are enough for such naïve beliefs – if or where they existed - to be seen for what they are, namely straw persons.

The genesis of the situations now facing North African countries does look rather special, that is to say not military overthrow of the former regime by external force (as in Iraq, although Libya is a partial exception); and not the emergence of terminal fissions in the old ruling group (these began to appear only after a momentum for change began to build from below); and not a gradual morphing of political liberalisation into democratisation during which key members of the former regime control the manner and direction of change. The last approach might eventually bring about something like constitutional monarchy in Morocco and Jordan, but there are few signs yet that the monarchs are willing to abandon personal rule. However the origins of the MENA region's revolutions that can be traced to widespread social and economic discontents and to grievances about self-serving rule certainly are not unique; much of black Africa's second 'wind of change' in the 1990s was built on similar foundations. Africa's steps forward in democratisation since then may look greater than the reversals^{xv}, which feeds hope for MENA countries. But there is still a long way to go. And without improvements to socio-economic rights and the physical security of citizens, Africa's political gains are judged both fragile and incomplete.^{xvi} This too is a relevant pointer to MENA's future.

In MENA countries ordinary people decided it was time to say enough is enough. They reacted to a steady accumulation of resentments in a way that could have been predicted, although failure to anticipate the speed with which a boldness to protest overcame fear and spread across borders is easier to understand. In countries like Georgia, Serbia and Ukraine in contrast the spark that was responsible for regime replacement was different, in so far as a blatantly fraudulent election

is what seemed to trigger the protest from below. Also, the potential cost to the individual from taking protest to the streets there was smaller, especially compared to Libya and Syria where the regime's response was so brutal. Across the MENA region the conduct of the armed forces has been – continues to be – a determining influence on the course of events. This brings back into focus an actor that was almost lost sight of in much of the democratisation discourse as it moved on from its early origins debating the democratic transitions in Latin America's southern cone. The belief that semi-liberalised authoritarian rule can persist almost indefinitely has certainly taken a knock. And different kinds of regime now exist from those which were there before in MENA. But fragility and high fluidity remain.

A second overarching conclusion is that on the limited evidence the region supplies so far, there is no reason to doubt the conventional wisdom that democracy's progress after initial breakthrough is contingent on interaction among a plurality of interconnecting variables. These include institutional choices, political cultural factors, social forces and economic circumstances, together with influences from outside and among which international democracy support is probably just a minor part. Developing even more fine-grained theories that distinguish between alternative scenarios like openings to democracy (and the influences upon that), democratic transition (and the influences), democratic consolidation (and the influences) and – just as important – reversals in respect of each and every one of these scenarios, remains a worthy endeavour in the light of MENA experience. But as of now, such theory construction may offer only limited purchase for would-be providers of democracy support. For only after the event and with the benefit of hindsight will we know for sure which of these alternatives most accurately describes the developments that have been taking place on the ground. And even then we might never understand fully the immediate causes and the timing of what began as spontaneous popular events.^{xvii} Once clear political trends start to become more embedded, then it should be possible for comparative political analysis to generate greater insights that democracy support might put to some use. But by then the most optimal time for influencing the course of events may have passed.

Third and notwithstanding the above, international support for democracy can see itself as being in a better place than it was immediately before the Arab awakenings. The revolutions provided grounds for critical self-reflection: albeit the fruits so far may not look very impressive and the task

remains work in progress. But the situation found in the countries where some kind of opening to democracy has been attempted provides a much stronger case for democracy support to be involved now than if the Arab transformations had already failed and were reverting back to authoritarian rule or, conversely, are now proceeding smoothly and swiftly towards stable well-regarded democracy. The logic of this argument still applies even if one conclusion drawn from the Arab spring is that it tells us democracy support can make little contribution to bringing down authoritarian or semi-authoritarian rulers, such as those in Iran, the Persian/Arabian Gulf and further afield. So further deliberation now should dwell on how to support the MENA countries where change is taking place, and help them maintain or re-install a democratic direction during these testing times when political struggles between contending forces are far from over.

Needless to say international support must be on an invitation basis and take forms that are acceptable to partners on both sides – conditions that are quite restrictive such as in respect of the foreign funding of political parties and civil society organisations in Egypt in particular. And relations with the larger and broader foreign policy initiatives of actors outside the region have to be supportive as well. For example, the EU's repeated rebuffing of Turkey's aspirations to gain full EU membership not only reduces the EU's ability to encourage Turkey to embrace democratic norms and freedoms more fully, but also risks signalling to MENA countries a low confidence in the compatibility of democracy and Islam. Europe denies itself opportunities to use Turkey's growing influence as a force for democracy in MENA countries. The political reshaping of the European Union that is under way as a result of sovereign debt crises in the Eurozone could see the emergence of two rings of members - an inner ring more closely integrated politically than now and an outer ring including the UK (with or without Scotland if Scotland votes for independence and seeks a different relationship with the EU) that is much looser politically. Historic opportunity moments such as these that could revive the possibility of Turkish accession – if appropriate only to the second of these rings, in the first instance – could have multiple benefits for international democracy support in the larger Middle East region. In so far as the future fortunes of Europe's flagging economy benefitted there would be a windfall gain too.

The evidence from the global picture of attempted democratisation from the 1970s onwards tells us that liberal democracy's chances of being firmly institutionalised in the space of a few years

are not high. The local context in the MENA countries and the course of events since 2010 do little to suggest that the odds in this region are any more favourable. But none of this means democracy in the world has made no progress, or that compared to several decades ago there are not now more freedoms in several countries whose regimes are not as (liberal) democratic as democracy supporters in the West would wish. So long as there are pro-democratic voices in the MENA region who are themselves in a better place than they were before 2010, it will be hard to conclude that international democracy support has no future relevance there or anywhere else in the world. The key questions then will revolve not around whether but instead around who are the most appropriate actors on either side, how to express support and for what. Identifying pro-democratic social forces outside the more traditional modal patterns of civil society or party engagement and the kind of partnerships that will work for the purpose of building new democracies is one area where research could now concentrate. Determining how imaginative the West can be and wants to be in its ideas of democracy suggests another area where democratisation studies and democracy support studies both separately and together could engage in more new thinking.

In conclusion, recent developments in the MENA region both present challenges that should be viewed as opportunities, and offer opportunities that will be challenging to address, not just for democracy support in the region and further afield but in terms of the guidance that democratisation studies have to offer.

Notes

ⁱ For elaboration of these points see P. Burnell, *Promoting Democracy Abroad: Policy and Performance*, New Brunswick, New Jersey and London: Transaction Publishers, 2011.

ⁱⁱ See for example M. Spoerri, 'Crossing the line: partisan party assistance in post-Milošević Serbia', *Democratization*, 17(6), 2010, pp. 1108-1131.

ⁱⁱⁱ See for example J. Teorell, *Determinants of Democratization. Explaining Regime Change in the World, 1972-2006*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

^{iv} L. Diamond, *The Spirit of Democracy. The Struggle to Build Free Societies Throughout the World*, New York: Henry Holt, 2008, especially chapter 13 'Making Democracies Work'.

^v S. M. Lipset, 'Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy', *The American Political Science Review*, 53 (1), 1959, pp. 69-105.

^{vi} S. Huntington, *The Third Wave. Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*, Norman, Oklahoma and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991.

^{vii} M. Kurki, *Democratic Futures. Revisioning Democracy Promotion*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2013; C. Hobson and M. Kurki (eds), *The Conceptual Politics of Democracy Promotion*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2012.

^{viii} Op cit.

^{ix} D. Resnick, 'Foreign Aid in Africa: Tracing Channels of Influence on Democratic Transitions and Consolidation', UNU-WIDER Working Paper WP/015, Helsinki, 2012.

^x See P. Burnell, 'External Accountability Meets Accountability Assistance: the Case of Legislative Strengthening in Africa', in D. Chirwa and L. Nijzink (eds), *Accountable Government in Africa. Perspectives from Public Law and Political Studies*, Tokyo/New York/Paris: United Nations University Press, 2012, pp. 273-92.

^{xi} S. Levitsky and L. Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism. Hybrid Regimes After the Cold War*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

^{xii} See for example J. Kelley, *Monitoring Democracy: When International Election Observation Works, and Why It Often Fails*, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2012.

^{xiii} Teorell, op cit, p. 68-70.

^{xiv} M. Gillies (ed.), *Elections in Dangerous Places. Democracy and the Paradoxes of Peacebuilding*, Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 2011.

^{xv} G. Lynch and G. Crawford, 'Democratization in Africa 1990-2010: An Assessment', *Democratization*, 18(2), 2012, pp. 275-310.

^{xvi} Ibid.

^{xvii} K. Dalacoura, 'The 2011 Uprisings in the Arab Middle East: Political Change and Geopolitical Implications', *International Affairs*, 88 (1), 2011, p.79.